

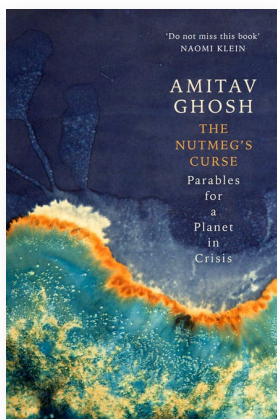
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REVIEW: DELIA FALCONER ON AMITAV GHOSH

A Dazzling Synthesis

Menu

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The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis

by Amitav Ghosh

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We have been aware for centuries that we are responsible for the earth's denudation: its 'cold staring spaces', as English writer John Evelyn called them in 1706, mourning the trees chopped down on his estate. Around a hundred years later, the Prussian explorer Alexander Von Humboldt worried over 'mankind's mischief', conjecturing that if humans ever ventured into outer space, they would carry with them a tendency to leave everything ravaged and barren. (The closer they resembled man, he also observed, 'the sadder monkeys look'). 'Are the green fields gone?' asked the narrator of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, published fifty years after Von Humboldt's 1801 diary, as he watched his fellow Manhattanites staring dreamily out to sea. And yet, even if it was to take part in the industrial massacre of whales, Melville's Ishmael could outrun his depression in that 'great tide-beating heart of the earth,' the 'mysterious, divine Pacific'. Over the last half-century, predictions of global environmental catastrophe have loomed, but always far ahead. 'Future generations are unlikely to condone our lack of prudent concern for the integrity of the natural world that supports all life,' wrote Rachel Carson in *The Silent Spring*, opening the eyes of the public in the 1960s to the agricultural chemicals poisoning soil, water, and air. This scientific conception of a 'chain of connection' (in Von Humboldt's words) between the plants and animals of our world dates back to his era, though Carson would make us poignantly aware of the fragility of the web of life and the risk of a deathly hush on the other side of its destruction.

Of course, a natural and cosmological system whose duty it is humans' to care for as kin has been central to the world's Indigenous cultures for thousands of years, including among Australia's many First Nations; though by Von Humboldt's time many had already seen their worlds violently disrupted by colonialism. In 1855, four years after Melville's novel was published, Duwamish chief Seattle would write a(n unsubstantiated) letter to US President Franklin Pierce, echoing Ishmael in his rebuke to the fantasy of the open frontier: 'When the buffalo are all slaughtered, the wild horses all tamed, the secret corners of the forest heavy with the scent of men, and the view of the ripe hills blotted by talking wires, where is the thicket? Gone. Where is the eagle? Gone. And what is to say goodbye to the swift and the hunt, the end of living and the beginning of survival?'

Yet today, if we think of Melville's grand ocean, we are as likely to associate it with the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a gyre of plastic, wood pulp, and chemical sludge, which covers an estimated 1.6 million square kilometres between Japan and America's west coast (and is, in fact, two distinct

collections of mostly fingernail-sized trash connected by the currents of the North Pacific Subtropical Convergence Zone). If we think of whales, they no longer loom in our imaginations as Leviathans in their mysterious deep, but as embattled creatures, now offered some protections after being hunted almost to extinction. Though free, they can no longer exist entirely apart from us, in a warming and acidifying ocean, filled with our garbage and our noise. It's becoming increasingly clear, especially after a decade of devastating global mega-fires and the Coronavirus epidemic, that the impact of fossil-fuel dependent economies on the earth's systems has been inescapably profound.

Since around 2014, when the (not uncontroversial) term 'Anthropocene' entered common use, the knowledge has come upon us with shocking swiftness that the future of climate chaos is coming much sooner than predicted. At 1.1 degrees of warming (and we are on track for 2.9 on the current trajectory), the Earth's most dependable systems are already fraying and going off-scale in a series of cascading and increasingly unpredictable events. Haunted by deep time in the form of the carbon from the primeval forests we burn as fossil fuels, we are witnessing awe-inducing phenomena caused by global heating. Methane craters are blowing 'like a bottle of champagne' in Siberian permafrost—in turn adding more heating methane into the atmosphere—while we are seeing the loss of the seasonal patterns and other creatures by which we have navigated our very sense of ourselves. Still, in industrialised economies we live in a state of disconnect as global markets carry on assuring us that such effects can be gamed or managed — even as a world gone out of whack 'speaks' to us. As writer Christopher Schaberg observes of our uneasy present, in *Searching for the Anthropocene*, we are often troubled by 'a sense of something having gone *wrong*, even when it all appears to be going exactly as planned.'

It was this awful uncanniness that the eminent Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh tackled in *The Great Derangement* (2016), which might be thought of as Part One of his latest work of nonfiction, *The Nutmeg's Curse*. 'Who can forget those moments,' it began, 'when something that seems inanimate turns out to be vitally, even dangerously alive?' For Ghosh, our insistence on carrying on as normal in the face of the unthinkable is the enabling madness at the centre of modernity's addiction to extraction and consumption. At a time in which 'the wild has become the norm,' and 'freak' events such as tornadoes are becoming more common, he wrote, we are suffering in the 'West' from a 'crisis of imagination'.

American-based Ghosh, academically-trained with a doctorate from

AMERICAN-BASED GHOSH—academically trained with a doctorate from Oxford in anthropology—is an eloquent synthesiser and his book, which began as a series of 2015 lectures for the University of Chicago, drew on many of the major ideas bubbling in this field. Historian Dipesh Chakrabarty was the earliest to lay out, in a ground-breaking 2009 paper, the potential of this new epoch, in which human activity has become the planet’s driving force, to also destabilise the very pillars of humanist thought, including the distinction between natural and human history. Philosopher Tim Morton had written about the sticky unthinkability of huge changes like global heating across time and space; while other writers, like Robert Macfarlane had described the uncanniness of our moment as once long-scale change accelerates around us. Perhaps most closely informing Ghosh’s project was the galvanising argument, put forward by philosopher Bruno Latour in 2014, that the Earth, agitated by global heating, really *was* speaking to us. Animism was far less strange, he argued, than the magical thinking by which Western science, in the name of being ‘modern,’ had deanimated a self-sustaining world alive with interdependent agencies and reduced it to mere stuff. *The Great Derangement’s* title so potently captured the perversity of the collective delusion capitalism depends on to conduct business as usual that it has become part of the vocabulary of others working in this space.

The book’s chief originality lay in identifying the modern novel as a powerful agent in acclimatising us to this derangement. Coming into its own just as ‘the accumulation of carbon in the atmosphere was rewriting the destiny of the earth,’ it was a Western technology of thought as essential to our alienated way of living as the physical machinery of extraction. Probability and the modern novel, Ghosh wrote, ‘are in fact twins, born at about the same time, among the same people, under a shared start that destined them to work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of violence.’ Before its birth, he argued, folk epics had delighted in the unheard-of and unlikely, like the *Miracles of Bon Bibi* of the Sundarbans, whose hero looks into the eyes of a tiger demon. Events like a freakish tornado Ghosh survived in Delhi in 1978 still had the power to prompt our vestigial recognition that we’ve never existed independently of the inhuman. But having pruned the real into a shape acceptable to bourgeois tastes, he argued, the modern novel’s regular pulse was now incapable of registering a nature behaving with a new menace and uncertainty as ‘the uncanny is beating on our door.’ Yet for a novelist to introduce climate disaster, with its spectacular special effects, into their plot would be ‘a contrivance of last resort’ that would be ‘court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence’.

Ghosh was so acute in describing Western culture's deformed sense of probability in the face of freakish acceleration that corralling his observations within the elite arena of literary fiction seemed as much of a constraint as a provocation. Surely the novel has had less cultural influence than popular culture over the last half-century at least. And what of the younger generations of writers, far less concerned with genre boundaries, who had been taking daring imaginative risks to extend the novel to encompass a newly lively world? Perhaps, like James Wood, who criticised the busy 'hysterical realist' novels of the late twentieth century for being insufficiently serious to fathom the gravity of 9/11, the attachment to hierarchies in the process of becoming radically unstable, and the fear of being banished to fiction's 'outhouses', was Ghosh's own.

The more compelling originality of *The Great Derangement* lay, for this reader at least, in the way Ghosh flipped the Western-orientated compass needle toward South Asia as the centre of the environmental crisis, just as he had so passionately in his novel *The Hungry Tide* (about the endangered swampland environment of the Sundarbans, in the Bengal Delta) and its sequel *Gun Island*. And this was personal. Ghosh recounts that his own family had moved to the shore of the Ganges, in India, from Bangladesh, in the 1850s when the Padma River changed course, drowning most of the inhabitants of their village. 'My ancestors were ecological refugees,' he writes, 'long before the term was invented.'

Ghosh's account of the history of Asian industry under colonialism was eye-opening; Burma, for example, had oil refineries under its royal dynasty before the British invaded, which would become the nucleus of Burmah-Shell; Bombay had such successful shipyards that the English industry complained that 'the families of all the shipwrights in England are certain to be reduced to starvation,' until Britain, under an 1815 law, restricted Indian ships and sailors. It was not the physical technology, he argued, that shaped today's global economy, but European imperialism. The Western suppression of Asian economies had in fact delayed today's environmental crisis.

Now, in the face of Asia's modernisation (and carbonisation) it was apparent that the work of combatting global heating must lie in dismantling the economic structures that maintained the status quo and the 'uniformitarian expectations around the ideal regularity of bourgeois life, which have become, largely, our global norms.' It would also involve a recourse to the more ancient, and local, knowledge, stridently overridden by development. Ancient Japan had, after all, its hundreds of unheeded hillside 'tsunami stones' with their warnings not to build on the ground

...under volcanic stones, with their warnings not to build on the ground below them, which remained untouched by the 2011 east-coast Tohoku earthquake and tsunami. The very speed of the growing crisis, he hoped, might spur ways of thinking and living that recognised the agency of the planet's other creatures, though he was pessimistic about the possibility of secular movements gathering enough urgency or force within the ever-shrinking horizon of time.

Still, the 'great derangement' retained its grip, even on the author, whose mother was living at the time of writing in the family home in Kolkata. Knowing from all his research the likelihood of extreme weather events hitting the previously-sheltered city, he was still worried, as he advised her to move in case of future climate instability, that his warning sounded like 'lunacy'.

Five years on and the uncanniness Ghosh described is only more intense but the messaging that planetary disaster is likely already underway is now less far-fetched. 'Once-in-a-hundred-year' fire and flood events are occurring with a frightening frequency while reports tell us that the last time carbon dioxide levels were this high in the Earth's atmosphere was probably during the Pleistocene, between 2 and 4.6 million years ago, when sea levels were 18 to 24 metres higher than today. Fittingly, in *The Nutmeg's Curse*, Ghosh moves the origin point of this derangement further back in time to tell an epic story of the role of racialized European colonialism in the Earth's exploitation. With characteristic gracefulness, he chooses to expand this analysis out from the early nutmeg trade.

The nutmeg, or *Myristica fragrans*, is an evergreen tree with bell-shaped flowers and lemon-coloured fruit. When the fruit dries, it exposes the seed. The red outer covering was used for mace but it was the kernel, the nutmeg, that Europeans coveted. It preserved and flavoured foods and was thought to have aphrodisiacal properties; physicians prescribed nutmeg pomanders to cure the 'bloody flux' and plague. But until the sixteenth century merchants had to buy the fantastically expensive spice from Venice, whose importers bought it in turn from Constantinople, to which it had travelled through long-established eastern trade routes. The mystery of the seed's source was only solved in 1511 when the Portuguese found their way to the Banda Islands in the far south-east of the Indian Ocean (now part of Indonesia), whose volcanic soils were the sole microclimate in which the tree flourished. In 1595, the Dutch arrived, intent on conquest. The Dutch East India Company forced the Indigenous

Banda Islanders to grant them a monopoly, disrupting established trading networks for food, meaning that the coercive ‘agreement’ was often broken.

Ghosh’s book opens in 1621 in the village of Selamon at the culmination of the Dutch campaign to subdue all resistance on the island of Lonthor (also known as Great Banda) and force its inhabitants to leave. The official Martijn Sonck is moving from village to village with two thousand Dutch soldiers and eighty hired *ronin* (masterless Japanese samurai), ordering the Islanders to surrender, destroying their fortifications, and searching the forests for those who have fled.

As Ghosh read the original accounts, he recalls, a minor incident snagged his attention. On the night of 21 April, Sonck had gathered with his counsellors in an appropriated meeting house to make further plans for emptying the island, when a lamp fell from a shelf. Thinking it was a signal intended to trigger a surprise attack, the men panicked and began shooting. Throughout this book, Ghosh will keep looping back to this moment of paranoia and its aftermath as an echo that still reverberates today. It offers an entry point into telling the story, a repressed that keeps returning:

It might be said that the page has been turned on that chapter of history: that the twenty-first century bears no resemblance to that long-ago time when plants and botanical matter could decide the fate of human beings. The modern era it is often asserted, as freed humanity from the Earth, and propelled it into a new age of progress in which human-made goods take precedence over natural problems.

But this isn’t true, he writes. The small story of the fate of this island, although it is a small story next to the much bigger history of colonisation unfolding in the Americas, ‘might be read as a template for the present, if only we knew how to tell that story.’

The main work of *The Nutmeg’s Curse* is to make visible the long and programmatic history of racial violence at the heart of colonialism as a ‘warfare of a distinctive kind’. Like our crazed exclusion of a living world from our sense of human destiny, he argues, this warfare normalised itself through the West’s insistence on imagining nature as separate from ‘history’ and ‘politics’. He describes how the English terraformed an abundant America to suit European needs, then congratulated themselves

that it was kinder to let ‘nature’ take care of the inevitable decimation of the Native Americans’ way of life. They would also evolve the ‘virgin soil’ theory (that Indigenous people’s immune systems were fundamentally different in their resistance to disease). Yet as Ghosh points out, this depended upon turning a blind eye to the butchery, malnutrition, stress, and starvation that the colonisers visited upon the colonised, along with the deliberate seeding of epidemics.

Ghosh’s focus on the colonists’ use of disease as ‘invisible bullets’ against Native American people, which draws on a strong body of academic work on eighteenth-century biological warfare, is useful in seeing Australia’s contemporaneous colonial history within a global, and programmatic, pattern. It certainly adds weight to the highly debated theory—not mentioned in Ghosh’s book—that the First Fleet deliberately seeded smallpox (or ‘devil devil’) among the Sydney people in 1789. Killing at least an estimated half of the local Indigenous population around the harbour, the disease would pass ahead of the colonial frontier with those escaping along the trade, family, and cultural networks of the east coast, causing terrible suffering and devastation. (It’s a shame in a book of such ambitious scope that its references to Australia—where many historians have been writing so astringently in partnership with Indigenous people about the ongoing violence of colonisation, and where Acknowledgement of Country is made routinely at most public events—are perfunctory and, when they do occur, less sure-footed.)

Nevertheless, *The Nutmeg’s Curse* is often dazzling in its synthesis, particularly when linking past to present. In the chapter, ‘Brutes,’ Ghosh parses the origins of the word, considers the ways in which capitalist expansion continues to depend upon excluding those not deemed fully human from historical agency, and then goes on to consider how COVID-19—from which wealthier countries weren’t as insulated as they may have expected—is showing us how the planetary crisis will unfold in ‘surprising and counterintuitive ways’. While the virus seemed to slow down time it also seemed to accelerate collective historical consciousness, as he describes watching, from his American home, the Black Lives Matter movement gain force and ubiquity to topple the monuments of a violent colonial past. And yet, he notes, racial violence was so entrenched that the publication of data on the virus’s disproportionate effect on people of colour didn’t lead to extra assistance to those population groups. Instead, the American political and financial elite were inclined to see the rising death toll, in the words of journalist Adam Server, ‘less as a national emergency than as an inconvenience.’

Like *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh's book is most galvanising when he turns his attention to the Indian Ocean basin as the centre of the Anglosphere's continuing patterns of exploitation. He observes that the choke points for oil and gas transportation now are the 'exact locations that European colonial powers fought over when the Indian Ocean's most important commodities were cloves, nutmeg, and pepper.' While they may be currently under American control, watched over by its 'Empire of Bases', this dominance is the product of 'centuries of combined Western effort, going back to the 1500s'. The area also continues as the main theatre of the world's economic activity: its sea lanes carry one third of the world's bulk cargo, fifty per cent of the world's container traffic, and 70 per cent of crude and oil products. Not coincidentally, most of the fastest-growing militaries are also in this region, which is now, he writes, with his characteristic turn of phrase, both a 'battlefield and sweatshop'. Military forces are among the world's biggest users of fossil fuels, although these are—startlingly—never factored into global climate negotiations. Ghosh fears that the cheapness of greener fuel sources may be as much of an inhibition as an incentive to change. Decarbonisation will depend on military nations' willingness to adjust to a new geographical order.

Most powerfully, in considering the deaths of refugees from Bangladesh, Ghosh argues that climate change is not 'like' a war; for refugees experiencing planetary crisis, the violent crossing of borders, and slave camps, it already *is*. Unlike the First and Second World Wars, in which Britain and the United States mobilised to confront and defeat a human enemy, today's 'forever wars' are not events with a beginning or an end but a 'structure of invasion' uncannily akin to the biopolitical conflicts of the sixteen and seventeenth centuries. Climate inaction is anything but passive. It is rather a kind of slow violence, its casualties herded 'into ever-shrinking zones of containment, in North Africa, the Sahara, Mexico, Central America, and islands like Nauru'.

The second strand of *The Nutmeg's Curse* is the story of the nutmeg itself. 'Taking a nutmeg out of its fruit is like unearthing a tiny planet,' Ghosh writes:

Like a planet, the nutmeg is encased within a series of expanding spheres. There is, first of all, the fruit's matte-brown skin, a kind of exosphere. Then there is the pale, perfumed flesh, growing denser toward the core, like a planet's outer atmosphere. And when all the flesh has been stripped away, you have in your hand a ball wrapped in what could be a stratosphere of fiery, crimson clouds: it is this fragrant outer sleeve that is known as mace. Stripping off the mace reveals yet

outer sleeve that is known as mace. Stripping off the mace reveals yet another casing, a glossy, ridged, chocolate-coloured carapace, which holds the nut inside like a protective troposphere. Only when this shell is cracked open do you have the nut in your palm its surface clouded by matte-brown continents floating on patches of ivory.

If there is a hero, or lead protagonist, in *The Nutmeg's Curse*, it is this seed as a small agent of history. By switching focus Ghosh provides a corrective to the numerous books about the spice trade, like Giles Milton's bestselling *Nathaniel's Nutmeg*, which have emphasised the derring-do of its European exploiters. (In Milton's book, the 'sometimes grisly details' (as he put it) of colonialism played second fiddle to the story of how the English, who had reached the tiny island of Run at the beginning of the seventeenth century, traded it with the Dutch in 1667 for Manhattan). This aligns with current academic arguments that the roots of our current globalization have been in place since at least 1492, when the world entered upon an era of trade whose urge for cultural and economic uniformity also created profound biological bedlam: the 'Homogenocene', with its relentless logic of making-same, is, in the words of 'blue humanities' scholar Steve Mentz, 'a story of catastrophic cultural change without heroes'.

For Ghosh the nutmeg is the dynamic ambassador for the vibrant life of things that European modernity, in its crazed magical thinking, declares inert. Its travels perfectly illustrate the loss of meaning that is the other casualty of treating the world as a resource. In this work, Ghosh's book also joins the large and growing family of writing about the agency of objects and creatures once thought of as mere things, which ranges from 'object orientated ontology' to environmental philosophy such as Anna Tsing's and Merlin Sheldrake's work on fungi to novels that feature non-human protagonists.

Such writing, like the work of the late Deborah-Bird Rose, often turns toward the wisdom of Indigenous cultures, who conceive of the world as a dynamic and shimmering set of enmeshments with place. While nutmeg is now cultivated elsewhere in the world, the Banda Islands are the only place, Ghosh writes, where people sang – and still sing – about the small nut, thus preserving it from a fate as a mere commodity; though he observes, intriguingly, that the people who were brought to work the Dutch plantations also developed a rich body of belief about this place. For once they had murdered the Indigenous people to create plantations, the Dutch East India Company would import indentured labourers, convicts, migrants, and slaves from around the South Asian region—among them,

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530 captive Banda Islanders they returned to teach the settlers nutmeg cultivation. So many would die in its system of ‘racial capitalism’ that it would have to bring in 5000-7,700 enslaved people annually.

Yet the closest relative to Ghosh’s book, it occurred to me, is another about a fruit that is also grown in Indonesia for a global market: Australian-born anthropologist Michael Taussig’s *Palma Africana* (2018). This strange invocation of ‘agro-genocide’ is set in the palm oil plantations gouged (in this instance) into Colombia’s rainforest, with their own potent mix of European conquest, Indigenous dispossession, slavery, and American intervention. Taussig, who is more of a mystic than Ghosh, writes a slippery, sometimes frustrating, ‘ethnographic surrealism’ to channel the ‘instabilities, fragmentation, shock, and phantomlike qualities’ of modern and premodern as they meet in a shifting matrix of agribusiness, guerrilla warfare, plants, animals, and local magic. The two approaches are fascinating to compare: while Taussig tries to find a way of writing that juggles the dark lightning of global capitalism, Ghosh remains for the most part passionately rational. Yet both are at pains to show how, as resources dwindle and global markets continue to colonise the world, vitalism and science are meeting in increasingly unexpected and uncanny combinations.

Still, Ghosh has his mystical moments. Towards the end of the book, he travels to Banda Neira, the island that became the hub of the Dutch administration. He visits the well where the remains of forty headmen were thrown on 8 May, 1621 and the nearby mansion where the Dutch East India company lodged its top officials. Here, he is deeply disturbed by the feeling of a presence that is at once ‘human and inhuman’. Not long afterward, he wakes abruptly in the night to discover a lamp has fallen in his hotel room.

As his thoughts return to the night in April 1621 when the crashing of the lamp in the meeting-house caused such panic, he finds himself wondering why it was *after* the Island’s elders had ‘confessed’ to planning an attack—when it was already inevitable that the hired samurai would slaughter them—that the Dutch subjected them to torture that included an early version of waterboarding. In one of the illuminating historical cross-tunings he excels in, Ghosh notes that this was the same period during which witches were being exterminated in Europe. He recalls feminist scholar Carolyn Merchant pointing out that this torture—often employing machines of barbaric invention—went hand in hand with the emerging philosophy of science, whose mechanist definition of nature was determined to drive from it any disorder perceived as secretive and

feminine. Perhaps the Dutch, Ghosh posits—whose still lives were at the same time depicting the products of their colonies as inert piles of plunder—also feared the vital energies of a world they were ending. As if

the pain inflicted on the headmen were a means of subjugating not just a group of humans but also the landscape they inhabited . . . as if the islands themselves were being exorcised so that no ghosts would remain to hinder the efficiency of the future nutmeg-producing machine.

And yet, as brilliant as this analysis is, it is startling to observe that gender only appears obliquely in the book's last three pages, in spite of a rich body of literature analysing its complex role, intertwined with race, as another technology of coloniality. We know from this literature, and from our own country's past, that the weight of colonial violence falls differently on non-masculine bodies while exclusion from rigidly defined European templates of maleness also played its part in defining the colonised as 'brutish,' and thus deserving of the appalling treatment meted out to them. Patriarchal violence has also been linked explicitly by theorists to ecological destruction and the fascist 'blood and bone' movements Ghosh criticises elsewhere in his book while gender is still an overlooked element of the global labour economy and its 'forever wars', as writers like Cynthia Enloe have argued. Not long before Ghosh was following the BLM protestors on his street, I found myself thinking, the Washington Women's March on the day after Trump's 2017 inauguration had been the largest single-day protest in US history and would spawn its own wave of global protests.

The nutmeg's curse has continued to resonate, Ghosh argues, in the repeating logic of annihilation. For once the Dutch East India Company had established its monopoly on the spice trade and had replaced the region's rich abundance with plantations and slave labour, global prices fell. And so, to make the spices more valuably scarce again, it began a process of extirpation. Determining that nutmeg was only to be grown on the Bandas, and cloves on Ambon, the Dutch sent hundreds of men into the thousands of other islands in the archipelago of Maluku to hack the trees out of the soil. For Ghosh, this embodies the 'omnicide' at the heart of our current climate crisis: the unrestrainable and excessive desire to destroy all life until a 'conquered, inert, supine. . . Earth can no longer ennoble, nor delight, nor produce new aspirations'. As the final 'parable' of colonialism's bitter legacy, this is devastating. And yet, as I come to the

colonialism's bitter legacy, this is devastating. And yet, as I came to the end of this elegant and urgent book, I found myself wondering if one small seed could stand in for so much history; or whether elegance is indeed the best way to approach the planet's increasingly chaotic 'great derangement'. These days the nutmeg's mysterious magic has been reduced; you can see the striated innermost sphere of this little "planet" exposed and photographed in fetishized close-up in every book and web page on spices (and indeed illustrating many reviews of Ghosh's book). Perhaps the palm oil tree—invisibly present in half of everything we consume, from the ice cream whose melting process it slows to toothpaste and shampoo—is now the zombie-ish inheritor of its curse. Uncanny, ubiquitous and invisibly lubricating global capitalism, through its cheapness of production and the way it extends shelf life, it may more eloquently embody the deathly unthinkability that underpins our present that Ghosh so capably describes in both books, and which, perhaps, can no longer be dismantled.

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